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Temika

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Temika

By: Kelsey Radwick

I believe in the basic right to a childhood, a belief I gained from my friendship with a young girl who transferred into my third grade class. Her name was Temika, and despite our lack of common interests, we became fast friends. I soon wanted to stretch our friendship beyond the schoolyard. However, every time I invited her to join activities outside of class, she continually turned me down without explanation.

In the time that we did spend together, I began to think that her family seemed absent from her life. She never talked about her parents, they never came to school functions to support her, and Ms. Clark, not Temika's parents, brought in treats for the class on her birthday. As my curiosity grew, on a hunch I asked my mom, an attorney for Child Protection Services, to investigate. She came back to me a few weeks later, confirming my prediction. Temika was a foster child in the permanent custody of the state and living in a group care facility a few blocks from school. She'd been in multiple different foster homes throughout the previous few years.

We communicated with her case manager, and Temika was given permission to join in play dates at our home and on family outings. Around Christmas, her case manager allowed us to provide her gifts anonymously. Along with clothing and other practicalities, we purchased the one gift she wanted more than anything that holiday: a "Bratz" doll.

Shortly thereafter, we took her out to eat at the Rain Forest Café. Eyes bright with wonder, she was overwhelmed by the exotic restaurant's aquariums of saltwater fish and life size animal replicas. Upon our return to the group home, she insisted I see her room. Beaming with pride, she opened her bedroom door to reveal a small, cramped room with thin white-washed walls and a cracked ceiling. Tidy and bare, a plain dresser, drawers absent of possessions, was squeezed into the corner next to a twin bed. The hum of a furnace could be heard amid the yelling of children next door. One item caught my attention. The Bratz doll sat in a place of honor near the center of her bed propped on a throne of pillows. I was taken aback by the realization that the doll was not just a toy, but a companion for her to cling to in challenging times. When everything and everyone had abandoned her, the doll was something Temika could proudly call her own. It comforted her through the challenges of being an African American foster child at a predominantly middle-class Caucasian school, struggling to form relationships she knew would not last long, and constantly moving from one foster home to another.

Over the next year she had what her case manager called "therapeutic success," eventually being weaned off all anxiety medication, and successfully transitioning into a foster home. Temika was a girl who was forced to grow up way too fast. While most kids are shielded from many of the cruelties of the outside world, from the time Temika was born, she experienced the very worst of our society. I am honored to have been able to give her a piece of what it means to be a kid. Every child should have the chance to play with their friends, to hold a doll close, and to go on outings. They also have the right to a stable home life and family to support them through the tumultuous process of growing up, as well as into adulthood. I learned a great deal from Temika, and grew greatly as a person from our lasting friendship. I grew to appreciate more my upbringing and everything I have, and developed a desire for all children to have the childhood I have had.